Serodifferent Partners: Dating, Relationships, and Mixed HIV Status

People with HIV can have loving relationships and great sex with HIV-negative partners. Learn more about dating, intimacy, and long-term partnerships.

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You Are Not the Only One(s)

If you are living with HIV or AIDS and considering dating (or already in a relationship with) someone who is not living with HIV, you are most certainly not alone. People have been dating, partnering, getting married, having sex, having babies, and generally navigating relationships across HIV status throughout the HIV epidemic. Serodifferent relationship and mixed-status couple are terms often used to describe a couple or relationship in which one partner is living with HIV and the other is not.

Romantic and intimate relationships can be challenging for anyone, and differing HIV statuses may be part of that. But nowadays, we have more information and more tools than ever to help people living with and without HIV have healthy relationships and great sexual lives with one another, with infinitely less worry about HIV transmission. Science has helped improve people's lives; HIV stigma is what often stands in the way of the full enjoyment of those lives.

Some Language to Know

There are several terms used to describe relationships across HIV status. They all have similar meanings, though some may imply different things or be rooted in stigma. For more information about language and HIV, please see our fact sheet Why Language Matters: Facing HIV Stigma in Our Own Words.

- Discordant or serodiscordant: This term is still used in many HIV clinical writings and guidelines; many others consider the term stigmatizing because the word "discord" suggests conflict, disagreement, or misalignment (the "sero" part of these terms means "blood")

- Serodifferent, serodifference: A variation on “serodiscordant” that is not based in stigma, because “difference” does not have a built-in negative association
- Mixed-status: Refers to the different HIV statuses of the relationship’s members; similar to how a couple that includes people of different races is sometimes called a “mixed-race” couple
- Magnetic: Relates positive and negative HIV statuses within a couple to the “positive” and “negative” sides of a magnet, which are attracted to one another

> “[’Magnetic couple’] sounds sexy and fun. It conveys something exciting and joyful exchanged between people of two different statuses.” – Wanona “Nunu” Thomas, The Well Project Community Advisory Board (TWP CAB) member

Meeting and Dating

The process of meeting someone and dating them can be tricky regardless of HIV status. Three important points that many people living with HIV may consider are:

1. Do I want to date someone who is living with HIV or someone who is not?
2. When do we talk about HIV?
3. Should I disclose right away, or wait until I know the person better?

If you are looking for a positive partner, consider going to places (online and in person) where you will meet other people living with HIV. These include HIV-focused support groups, conferences, or dating websites such as hivnet.com, pozmatch.com, personals.poz.com, hivpeoplemeet.com, positivesingles.com, positivesdating.com, hivpassions.com, and hivpoz.net.

If it does not matter to you whether your partner is positive or negative, you can focus more on traditional methods – Internet dating websites or their smartphone apps, like Tinder, OkCupid, Tagged, and Plenty of Fish (POF); social media sites like Facebook Dating; singles events; places of worship; personals ads; or networking through friends.

Thoughts on dating from The Well Project’s community

> “I wanted to date someone with parallel values to me. I choose not to disclose unless someone is bold enough to ask because I’m very public about my status and it’ll take a very strong-minded and emotional person to deal with what comes with that level of publicity centered around addressing stigma. I decided long ago that I would not limit myself to only someone who is HIV-positive, because the idea was coming from a place of fear and I didn’t like that.” — Masonia Traylor, TWP CAB member

> “I have met people at school, at church outings, through friends and online dating. I don’t know which are easier or harder. But I do like online dating because I can read the bio and learn more about the person through questions and online messaging. It is a great way to weed out the bad ones. I have met some of my very best friends through online dating. Through friends I can ask questions and hope to get good answers. Dating is a game of chance and one in which you need to know what you really want. This means knowing and loving yourself.” — Marcya Gullatte, from “Love & HIV” on The Well Project’s A Girl Like Me blog

> “I have had lovers come back and tell me that people asked them, ’Why are you dating her? What if you get HIV? You can die.’” — PDEES, from “Queen” on The Well Project’s A Girl Like Me blog

> “I truthfully told him about the HIV [on POF, a dating app]. I don’t know what made me do it, but I did. And that was the first time I actually talked to someone about it other than close family and friends. And it felt good because he wanted to hear about my story and learn more. … [B]eing young, I usually would have met up with that guy and did who knows what. But because of what I’ve been through - finding out about the HIV and stuff - I made him and myself actually have a conversation and get to know each other.” — Destiny Smith, from “Testimony” on The Well Project’s A Girl Like Me blog

> “For me dating is like playing Russian roulette. You have to make sure you cover yourself, like having proof or some form of documentation that you had disclosed. You will encounter plenty of people wanting to date or talk to you privately but [without] all the benefits of a real relationship. Then you have those who are uneducated and ignorant to the virus but have an open mind to learn and not pass judgement. It has been a 50/50 rollercoaster for me.” — Wanona “Nunu” Thomas, TWP CAB member

Disclosure

For many women living with HIV, the big issue is disclosure. How and when do you tell? There is no one easy or perfect way to tell someone you are living with HIV.

Often, it is not how or when you tell, but whom you tell. If a potential partner is going to find your status unacceptable, it may not matter when you tell him/her. Similarly, if a person is going to accept you and your diagnosis, timing of disclosure may not matter. Continue reading…

The Well Project is a non-profit organization whose mission is to change the course of the HIV/AIDS pandemic through a unique and comprehensive focus on women and girls. Visit their website, www.thewellproject.org, to access fact sheets (English and Spanish), blogs, and advocacy tools, and to join a global community of women living with HIV.

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